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ABSTRACT

In the 1970s and 1980s the white Australian author Patricia Wrightson's cross-cultural fantasies concerning the conflict of White characters with Aboriginal folk spirits struck a chord with many adolescent and adult readers who judged these novels to be outstandingly successful. A classroom-based study examined the responses of a class of seventh grade, upper middle class, urban White Australian readers to two of Wrightson's novels. Students listened to daily chapter readings of "A Little Fear," then used introspective recall to formulate written responses immediately after each chapter. An intensive case study was then conducted of three readers selected from the mixed-ability class because of their fluency in articulating responses and enthusiasm to continue the study. These three readers read the second novel, "The Narqun and the Stars," silently and in individual daily sessions, and wrote responses to each chapter using introspective recall. Results indicated that there was a widespread lack of congruence of most students' interpretations of major elements of the novels. The study demonstrated the role of the reading community in facilitating or hindering a personal evolution of concepts necessary to allow readers to understand and accept a new and unexpected cultural literary interpretation. When interacting with challenging, multi-layered texts, young readers need time for reflection, a forum for negotiating meaning, and encouragement to make connections between existing constructs to expand and enrich their world representations. (Seventeen references are attached.) (RS)

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Australian Readers' Responses to the Cross-Cultural, Folklore-Based
Fantasy Novels of Patricia Wrightson

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Australian Readers' Responses to the Cross-Cultural, Folklore-Based Fantasy Novels of Patricia Wrightson

James Britton (1970) has asserted that we use literature to expand and improvise on our representation of the world. We construct such a representation from our continually accumulating store of experiences, and use it to interpret the past and to anticipate and make sense of fresh encounters. By fusing our own limited experience with that of an almost infinite number of others, we enrich, embroider, and fill the gaps of our world view, thus providing an extended basis for modifying or confirming generalizations, judgments, and decisions.

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Literary Transactions with Cross-Cultural Texts and Contexts

As our world becomes one of increasing cultural pluralism, so the construction of a viable, culturally-fair world representation by young people assumes a critical importance. Literature that involves a meeting of cultures has often been seen as a tool for developing such a multicultural world view. However, little can be assumed about how readers will respond to such cross-cultural literature, if one acknowledges the reader's active role in constructing meaning from the text. Over the past few decades, due to the influence of theorists like Harding (1962) and Rosenblatt (1978), we have witnessed a shift in emphasis from the text as a fixed, separate entity, with a discernible "correct" meaning, to the notion of a literary experience that is uniquely and creatively evoked through the transaction between each reader and text. The reader brings his or her past experience and present personality to the text, which both stimulates and regulates that reader's responses. In this "live circuit" (Rosenblatt, 1978) the active text guides and constrains, whilst simultaneously remaining open and requiring the reader's creative contribution.

Thus, although an author of cross-cultural literature may have an intended meaning, even a strong cultural message, encoded in verbal symbols, what readers bring to the text, especially in terms of cultural attitudes and expectation, will help shape their interpretation of those verbal cues. When young readers meet texts that reflect the life and values of one or more different cultural groups, the resulting transaction will produce for each reader a unique lived-through experience, one filtered by both personal and cultural values. This paper examines the responses of Australian readers to a set of award-winning novels that, in drawing on Aboriginal folklore to more authentically interpret the land, portray cross-cultural conflict that must be addressed by both sides.

Researchers have explored some of the diverse cultural variables that affect reader response, both from the viewpoint of the reader's own cultural values and understandings, and their transaction with the cultural content of the text. Such investigations have tended to focus on readers' interactions with literature that portrays ethnic characters in historical fiction or in works of contemporary social realism. A largely unexplored area, by both researchers and authors, is that of cultural pluralism in contemporary fantasy. Some writers weave in cultural elements of folktales and legends that reverberate throughout their fantasies, but few use folklore as a main cultural theme.

Aboriginal Folklore as the Source of Authentic Australian Fantasy

In the 1970s and 1980s there evolved a body of significant works of contemporary fantasy by white Australian author Patricia Wrightson, that brought together for the first time white human characters in conflict with ancient Aboriginal folk spirits. By interpreting the Australian landscape through the indigenous folk spirits that had always inhabited the land, Wrightson achieved a conceptual breakthrough in creating stronger, more convincing fantasy, a genre of Australian writing that had been languishing due to its unsuccessful grafting of imported folklore from the Old World (Wrightson, 1980). Wrightson perceived this fantasy-starvation in Australia to be the result of the inaccessibility of authentic magic, the "high, free magic" (p.611) of the past, the folklore of Aboriginal Australia. Accordingly, she rejected the European fairies, elves, and dragons for the more relevant, but little known earth spirits of tree, rock, and waterhole, that "must have been shaped by the land itself at the edge of Australian vision" (Wrightson, 1972, p.151). Only then was she satisfied that she had discovered the source of genuine, compelling fantasy.

Despite some objections from critics, and even her own reservations about laying hands on the "living folklore of a hurt and sensitive people" (Wrightson, 1980, p.614), Wrightson was convinced of the value of attempting to inject the vitality of this rich, indigenous literature into contemporary fantasy writing. In defending her position she stated:

. . . though I don't . . . overvalue the very little that I or any white writer can do, yet it still seemed essential to the Aboriginal people to get this process started. For how can you come to know a people without knowing something of its creative thinking? (Wrightson, 1979, p.188)

. . . there was this door that had to be opened and I do believe that for us [Australians] it leads into more than simple fantasy. Surely it opens up other things that some of us have missed? The hero; legend in the grand style; an old and simple vision of the land. These are things we could never attempt in Australia based upon the European folklore we inherit (Wrightson, 1980, pp.616-617).

By utilizing her revelation of the source of genuine Australian fantasy to produce seven folklore-based fantasy novels over nearly two decades, Wrightson has made a significant contribution to both Australian fantasy writing, and to an increased "flow" of cultures (Wrightson, 1979, p.202). In sharing her discovery of the strength and beauty of the Aboriginal folklore with her fellow white Australians, she wanted to shout, "Look here . . . a literature of poetry and terror and humanity grown out of your own country! Surely you must hear and respect it!" (personal communication, January 20, 1987). Her sensitive handling of the material has helped to lift this folklore "out of its static past" (Wrightson, 1979, p.189), allowing recognition of the richness and dignity of the literature of a culture that for too long has been unrepresented, or misrepresented, in the mainstream literate Australian society.

Wrightson has expressed a hope that her works will enable white Australian readers to feel the contact of this indigenous source, such that it "will quicken the sympathy and understanding of [her] own race for the Aboriginal people, and that in a little time the two cultures will truly

meet" (personal communication, August 20, 1987).

Adult Responses to the Meeting of Cultures in Wrightson's Novels

Bearing in mind these worthy and elevated ideals, so eloquently articulated by the author, it is interesting to consider the diverse responses of readers to these novels. Wrightson's first nervous attempt in 1972 to create an authentically-based fantasy, An Older Kind of Magic, met with an initially cool literary reception, which she attributed to "the unexpectedness of the merging of cultures" (Wrightson, 1979, p.188). The following year she successfully produced her first "shiveringly real" fantasy, The Nargun and the Stars, which won widespread adult acclaim: the book won the 1974 Australian Children's Book of the Year Award; a leading Aboriginal playwright and poet publicly endorsed her efforts to make contact with his culture; a young Aboriginal mother named her baby after the author; and expatriate white Australians wrote to her expressing empathy with the dangerous yet pitiful monster rock spirit, the Nargun, that identified something for them about their country "as they had known and felt it in an unspoken way" (Wrightson, 1980, p.615).

This success was followed by the Wirrin trilogy (The Ice is Coming, The Dark Bright Water, Journey Behind the Wind), which was on such an epic scale as to prompt comparison with Tolkein and Le Guin. These more complex novels introduced Aboriginal human characters pursuing an heroic quest. Although the first book of the trilogy won the 1978 Australian Children's Book of the Year Award, this series was neither written nor published for children, according to Wrightson.

After this intensive effort, Wrightson, ever conscious of intruding into the realm of sacred figures, scaled down her folkloric theme to a safer, potentially less offensive treatment of life "at the smaller end of the scale" (Wrightson, 1985, p.39). In the resulting slender novel, A Little Fear, terror is brought to the intruding white outsiders not by the great power of malevolent spirits like the Nargun, but by the power of little things, behaving in unexpected ways, under the command of a small ancient spirit of limited powers. Despite Wrightson's anticipation of a limited readership, this book swept through three printings in four months, eventually winning the 1984 Australian Children's Book of the Year Award and the 1984 Boston-Globe Horn Book Award in the U.S.A.

In 1986 Wrightson won international literary recognition with the Hans Christian Andersen medal, for her contribution "to Australian literature and, by extension, to literature everywhere, by giving shape to that country's underlying myth, the spirits that are the living land, and thereby making her country known to the world in the most fundamental way" (Saxby, 1988, p.185). Today she is widely recognized as Australia's most distinguished children's author, one who has, in the words of Walter McVitty (1981), created "a unique literature that has extended the boundaries of children's novels" (p.128).

Thus it can be seen that Wrightson's cross-cultural fantasies have struck a chord with many mature adult readers, who have judged these novels to be outstandingly successful. Publicly articulated responses such as those described above suggest that, for many such readers, the author has accomplished both her purposes for drawing on indigenous folklore: enrichment of her fantasy writing, and promotion of cultural understanding.

These satisfied readers seemingly have been able to draw on their prior experiences with life and literature to help them discern at least some of the cultural implications and understandings intended by the author. In other words, they have been able to enlarge their world representation to accommodate the cultural traditions and world view of the Aboriginal people, as interpreted by Wrightson.

Collecting the Responses of a Classroom Community of Young White Australian Readers

But what of the young readers for whom these books were predominantly marketed? How adequate are their world representations for interpreting the rich layers of meaning in Wrightson's skillfully crafted novels? Many young white Australian readers have little or no contact with the Aboriginal culture in their daily lives. Their resources for constructing and refining a culturally valid world view are limited: an often superficial or ad hoc classroom treatment in social studies; spasmodic media reports of cross-cultural conflicts; precious few literary works that reflect a non-imperialistic bias; and the attitudes of their parents, who themselves frequently have limited experience and/or interest in this often invisible minority culture.

To investigate concerns such as these, a classroom-based study was made of the responses of a class of seventh grade, upper middle class, urban white Australian readers to A Little Fear and The Narqun and the Stars. The study was designed to answer such questions as: To what extent did these students, when reading unassisted, recognize and respond to the folklore representations in the texts? In their unique reconstructions and interpretations of these texts, how did they utilize the explicit and implicit textual cues deliberately provided by the author to communicate her cultural intentions and meanings?

In the first phase of this study, the entire class of students listened to daily chapter readings of A Little Fear by the researcher, then used introspective recall to formulate written responses immediately after each chapter. The students were encouraged to write freely, without the benefit of any peer or teacher-led discussion, whatever was on their mind: feelings, images, predictions, and associated ideas that they recalled from the listening stage; as well as reflections on the completed chapter, or the story so far. To assist the structuring of their responses, the students were given an optional list of guiding questions (that most chose not to use); and to help stimulate their recall they were permitted, if desired, to make brief key word notations during the reading. The chapter responses were kept in individual folders, which were reviewed daily by the researcher to monitor the developing and changing individual interpretations, and to discern class trends in story reconstruction and response style. A written dialogue between student and researcher was maintained in these folders, to expand and clarify student responses. In addition, interpretive questions were addressed periodically to the whole class; and students were asked several times to show their interpretation of the spirit characters through sketches.

The second phase of the study comprised an intensive case study of three readers selected from this mixed-ability class because of their fluency in articulating responses and enthusiasm to continue in the study. They

represented a cross section of ability, gender, response style, and interpretation of the spirit creatures in the whole class phase. These three readers read the second novel, The Narqun and the Stars, this time silently and in individual daily sessions, but still writing responses to each chapter using introspective recall. These sessions were conducted in quiet, private areas of the school, or in the readers' homes. Although in most cases the researcher was present so that responses could be explicated and expanded orally immediately after the reading and writing, each of the readers was allowed to complete some of the chapters alone. This enabled the influence of the researcher's presence to be gauged, and simulated a more natural private reading environment. To trap more readily the readers' first conscious responses as they read, the students were encouraged to devise their own system of markings to use in their personal copies of the text. These notations were used subsequently to structure their written responses at the completion of each chapter reading.

Interpreting the Young Readers' Responses to the Author's Intended Cultural Meanings

When analyzing and interpreting these young readers' responses to both texts, an unusual opportunity was available to consider the author's intended meanings. Wrightson has gone to great lengths, in both professional journals and in authorial notes in the texts themselves, to explicate her use of the indigenous folk literature. In addition, her willingness to engage in a written dialogue with the researcher enabled her to respond to both the researcher's and the young readers' interpretations of her texts. It should be noted that the books used in this study are the only two of her folklore-based fantasies that have no explanatory preface or afterword to provide the attentive reader with an interpretive framework beyond the text itself.

Within the text of A Little Fear there are several interrelated aspects that are important for guiding readers towards the author's intended cultural meanings: The Australian setting, and the Aboriginality and spirituality of the ancient creature, the Njimbin. In interpreting setting and Aboriginality, readers are provided with only implicit textual cues, since the author makes no direct reference to either "Australia" or "Aboriginal". There are, however, explicit textual references to the Njimbin's spirituality. Recognition of the Australian setting and the antiquity of the creature of the land, helps guide a mature reader with a sufficiently elaborated schema of Aboriginal culture, towards an interpretation of the Njimbin as an Australian Aboriginal spirit. Let us now examine how these young Australian readers utilized the implicit and explicit textual cues in their attempts to make sense of their encounters with the Njimbin.

The context of the Australian countryside is developed by the author through a vivid backdrop of indigenous flora and fauna, that evokes an almost tangible sense of place, in her inimitable style. Koalas, kangaroos, echidnas, bandicoots, and wallabies are some of the specifically mentioned unique Australian animals that inhabit the remote bush setting, that is wooded with such distinctly Australian trees as banksias, wattles, stringybarks, and ironbarks.

Despite these multiple textual cues, surprisingly few students were able to articulate their own country as the setting of this story. Only 40% of the class claimed to have recognized the Australian setting, an additional

25% citing England, and 20% citing America. Many of the students seemed to lack either a well-developed sense of setting per se, or a sensitive awareness of the distinctive features of their own countryside. Further evidence of the restricted concept of setting was the fact that 20% of the class expressed an expectation of the setting of a book to be "somewhere else", besides Australia. It is possible that overt cues like koalas and kangaroos are overridden if there is a strong expectation for a foreign setting.

The many implicit textual cues to guide the reader towards an Aboriginal spirit interpretation of the Njimbin were utilized even less by these readers than those for setting. Although there is no direct reference to "Aboriginal" or "Aborigines", there are varied references to the Njimbin's antiquity and alliance with the land and with the "old people" (p.11), as well as to its Aboriginal-style hunting artifacts and methods, which had been modified by the arrival of "white men" (p.12). For example, it stored its weapons (spear, waddy, stone axe) in a dillybag down a wombat's burrow, and roasted goannas and witchetty-grubs.

The students brought to the reading of this text a general background knowledge of Aboriginal culture, gathered from a variety of sources, predominantly print and media, and formal school learning. However, only a few students drew on these prior experiences to enable them to focus their attention on some of the text's cues that signaled Aboriginality. Of 28 students, only one, Tony, expressed an unambiguous, immediate, and sustained interpretation of the Njimbin as an Aboriginal spirit. Two other boys who expressed an initial tentative Aboriginal interpretation ("a tribal spirit" and "an Aboriginal man") soon abandoned this early impression.

The text contains six explicit references to the word "spirit" in connection with the Njimbin, for example, "a sly and tricky spirit" (p.20), "the Njimbin's spirit-ears could hear nothing" (p.66), and "it had never been a spirit of great power" (p.80). However, only three students emerged with a final interpretation of the Njimbin as a spirit: Tony's clearly articulated "Aboriginal spirit"; Pam's vaguely expressed "type of spirit" (inferable as Aboriginal because of her designated Australian setting, and her comparison of the Njimbin to pictures of Aboriginal spirits she had seen in one of her father's books); and another girl's "elf like spirit man", in an English setting. Several other students expressed fleeting impressions of the Njimbin's spirituality, but as with the early Aboriginal impressions, they were subsequently abandoned for alternative interpretations.

Tony, described by his teacher as an average achiever, was the only student who utilized both the cues for Aboriginality and for spirituality. Unlike the other students, he was easily able to assimilate the Njimbin into his mental schematic representation of an Aboriginal spirit. In fact, he sought textual evidence to substantiate his early prediction: "I know it's an aboriginal spirit because of its name and weapons (spear) and food"; "it's eating witchetty grubs, that proves it's an aboriginal spirit." Paradoxically though, Tony did not attend to the cues to the Australian setting. He perceived the setting of a story to be of little importance, stating that "I wouldn't care if it was set in Libya, it doesn't really change the story much, I'd still enjoy it." He was also one of the students who expected foreign settings in books, so when asked where he thought the story was set, he surmised England, because of "the descriptions of the

cottage, hills and lakes." Interestingly, in the second phase of the study, shortly after Tony commenced reading The Nargun and the Stars, which explicitly states the Australian setting, he voluntarily began rereading A Little Fear. He soon began adjusting his earlier interpretation of setting, reasoning that since the Nargun was obviously set in Australia, therefore the author was Australian, and therefore her other book was also set in Australia. However, it was not until halfway through his rereading that he finally resolved his dissonance, stating that "I now suspect the story is set in Australia because the Njimbin is an ancient Aboriginal spirit and Aborigines live in Australia."

In addition to the widespread overlooking of cues to the Njimbin's Aboriginality and spirituality, nearly one third of these students also failed to attend to the direct references made to guide readers to a man-like interpretation of the Njimbin. Students arrived at such interpretations as raccoon, lizard, anteater, kangaroo, possum, and fox, despite the various references to the creature as "a Clever Man" (pp.12, 26, 36, 59); "a small man-thing with bushy white hair and beard" (p.37); and "a funny man" (p.45).

Thus it can be seen that in this classroom of readers, there was a widespread lack of congruence of most students' interpretations of the Njimbin, with the author's intended Aboriginal spirit interpretation. Certainly, failure to recognize the Australian setting served to increase this distance for some students. And those that did recognize the setting were not prepared for this unexpected meeting of cultures. Their concept of story did not embrace such a perspective, in the same way that they did not anticipate such cross-cultural relationships in their daily lives.

A major source of the limited concurrence of readers' and author's interpretations appeared to be the misfit of the readers' and author's concepts of "spirit". Most of these students failed to make a connection between their own concept of an invisible ghost-like spirit risen from the dead, and the lively Njimbin, who scuttled up trees like a lizard, was clearly visible to the dog, and hunted and ate food. The few students who initially accepted the guidance of the explicit spirit cues, had difficulty sustaining this interpretation, because increasingly the Njimbin did not fit their schema of "spirit". Because of their limited experience with the Aboriginal culture, it is not surprising that these students had difficulty coming to grips with the abstract and complex spiritual interpretation of this mature writer, who has spent a lot of time both living amongst Aboriginal people and researching their folklore.

To preserve authenticity and steer white readers away from their traditional concepts of European folklore, Wrightson deliberately chose to use the Aborigine's own word "spirit" for her creatures. However, as these young readers tried to fit their unelaborated concepts with the cultural labels of the author, many of them experienced a dissonance, not unlike the jarring Wrightson herself felt when she first experienced the unexpected meeting of cultures. At least six of these young readers reached instinctively for the European labels of "pixie", "elf", and "dwarf", a situation Wrightson had hoped to avoid. Because of the disproportionate number of European-based fantasies available to young Australians, most of these readers are conditioned to expect these types of fairies to inhabit their land. An example of this is one gifted student who had an extensive reading background of English style fairies, in the Enid Blyton mold.

Throughout the story she wrestled with the overlapping nuances of European versus Australian fairy terminology. Attentive to cues deriving from the way the Njimbin behaved, she tried to reason her way through a number of changing interpretations to accommodate both her "pixie-elf" and "little spirit man" theories. In the end she compromised by describing the creature as an elf-like spirit man, but her interpretation was clearly not that of an Aboriginal spirit. She was surprised to learn of the author's intended Australian setting: "I thought the story took place in England, because I thought the Njimbin was an elf and that's where I think elves live . . . I didn't think they had any aborigines there."

This problem of the lack of fit between the writer's and readers' concepts of "spirit" was evident also in the second phase of the study. The Nargun and the Stars contains a similar proliferation of implicit and explicit textual cues to the Aboriginal and spiritual nature of a whole host of creatures. In addition, each of the three readers read the publisher's synopsis that precedes the text, and which includes references to Aborigines, the Dreamtime, and spirits. Despite this pre-reading orientation, Tony was once again the only reader to enter and emerge from the literary experience with a firm conviction that the creatures were of Aboriginal origin. Even he, though, began to waver about his spirit interpretation towards the end of the book, as accumulating textual information about the strange rock-like monster, the Nargun, made it increasingly difficult for him to assimilate it into his spirit concept. This caused him to reach out to related concepts with overlapping conceptual features, looking for a better conceptual fit as he moved from "spirit" to "god" to "belief" to "legend".

Pam, described by her teacher as a low-average reader, developed a sense of some of the smaller creatures in this book as being "a kind of spirit", although she preferred to describe them as "made up creatures". However, the monstrous Nargun never seemed to fit her concept of spirit. As with the first book, she was never able to articulate a sense of Aboriginality, although her sketch of the tree spirits showed the same similarity as her Njimbin sketch to the thin, sad Aboriginal spirits she remembered from pictures of Aboriginal cave paintings.

Jodi, an avid and mature reader who was identified as a gifted student, seemed quite impervious to the textual cues that pointed to both the Aboriginality and spirituality of the creatures in both books. She did not reconcile these "imaginary creatures" with her concept of Aboriginal spirits, that she described as "made-up characters that Aborigines talk about as if they are real." At one stage she even rejected the multiple explicit textual evidence of the Potkoorok being a water spirit. She wrote, "I thought it strange that the Turongs called it the water spirit. Did they think it was some spirit or something. I don't know why they'd think that?" When asked, after completing both books, if she had realized that the author intended the creatures to be Aboriginal spirits, she claimed to have had an initial "vague idea" that they were, but was somewhat surprised because she "didn't think they were like Aboriginal spirits much."

Even a year later, having reread The Nargun and the Stars three times, and just viewed the television film version, Jodi appeared to have changed her interpretation of the characters very little. When asked again if she had any sense of the creatures being Aboriginal spirits, she was again vague:

Yeah, sort of, mm? Um, yeah, I sort of thought about that when I was watching, thought it might've had something to do with the Aborigines or something . . . She doesn't say much, what race they were descended from . . . she didn't give any sort of hints about it; she didn't really tell us anything.

It seemed as if Jodi, like many of her fellow classmates, was not using the factual knowledge constructed from her previous experiences with the Aboriginal culture to help her interpret these literary recreations of Aboriginal spirits. She reported a wide variety of learning sources, such as television documentaries and news programs, informational books and newspapers, as well as school learning "about Aboriginal spirits in almost every grade."

This failure to make links across learning suggests the need for establishing more significant relationships between diverse fields of learning to ensure meaningfully integrated learning which students can use to help make sense of their world. There is a two-way transaction in which meanings constructed in the primary, real world influence those constructed inside the secondary world of the reader, and vice versa. We need to encourage students to recognize and make the necessary connections, so that they may elaborate their existing schemata, thus extending their world representations. An ancient creature that has belonged to the Australian land for centuries, that has played tricks on and hunted alongside the dark-skinned Old People, and that has been displaced by the white newcomers, should be interpretable as an Aboriginal spirit.

However, such a level of interpretation involves tapping into the rich layers of meaning, which is difficult for young readers to accomplish in an unassisted, unshared first reading of such skillfully crafted novels. This study, by deliberately ignoring the power of the reading community of the classroom to help shape shared cultural meanings, significantly reduced the readers' chances of grasping the author's intended cultural implications of these two novels. If this unraveling of layers of meaning is important in expanding the boundaries of the world representations of young white Australian readers to embrace a multicultural perspective, then there seems to be a case for teachers to provide support and guidance in the reading of such novels. This should take the form of provision of opportunities to share, substantiate, discuss, and reshape interpretations, and to return to the text to make those extra discoveries that enrich the literary experience.

It is also important that we respect both the openness and constraints of the text. Authors accept that readers bring their own experiences, emotions, beliefs, and expectations to the text to create their own unique world of the work. In fact, they require readers to use all of these aspects of their world representations to creatively fill the "telling gaps" left deliberately to engage their intellect and imagination. Wrightson leaves particularly wide gaps, believing that "the less a story has to be told - the less it is loaded with words, explanation, accurate detail - the more spontaneously real it will be" (Wrightson, 1986, p.181). She is sensitive to the delicate balancing act of selecting just sufficient detail in order to suggest many more, but assumes that "generally, the practiced, consenting reader will assume the right details or quickly adjust if he or she seems to have gone wrong and not even be aware of doing so" (p.181).

In our desire to validate each reader's unique evocation of the literary work, we should not undervalue the stability of the text in facilitating communication with the author and a "cumulative sharing of culture" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p.99). In considering the constraints of the text, Rosenblatt reminds us that although the text provides the basis for multiple interpretations, some are more defensible than others: their viability requires that nothing in a reader's interpretation contradicts any elements of text, and that nothing is implied for which there is no verbal basis. The text is the author's means of directing the attention of the reader, and the verbal cues represent the blueprint that guides the selection of appropriate responses.

The distance of the creative gaps left in Wrightson's novels stimulated the curiosity and speculation of some of the students in this study (e.g. "I think this story so far is great because it makes me wonder a lot more than I do to other stories"); but others became confused or frustrated at the unaccustomed interpretive load left to them (e.g. "I wonder what the Njimbin looks like and what it is because I'm getting frustrated . . . I hate books that don't tell you what a thing is until the end. I reckon the author should tell us what the Njimbin is and what it looks like"). Some students failed to attend to the textual constraints that did not fit their existing personal constructs, and went well beyond the author's intended meaning in their individual realizations of the story. The spirit concepts of most students did not allow them to recognize the full-meaning and significance of the author's cultural intentions, but where their interpretations do not contradict Wrightson's explicit text, these must be accepted as viable in transactional terms. Although in the first reading of these challenging novels, many of the rich layers of meaning were not uncovered, these layers remain accessible to them should they return to the text.

Wrightson is prepared to wait for this process to happen, expecting that the openness of her texts will allow concepts to evolve in the reader's mind, yet not despairing if readers are insufficiently constrained by the text to share her intended cultural meanings.

In order to experience and tell the story, I had to reach my own concepts, but it isn't in the story's plan to pass them on whole. These spirits grew out of an old human experience in Australia; let them evolve in the same way in the European mind, out of the country itself (personal communication, January 20, 1987).

She is sympathetic to the conflict encountered by the young readers of this study, and even admits to "illogically . . . liking [their] translation into a possum or lizard", because of her own experience with the outsider's struggle to understand and accept the concepts of a new indigenous folklore. She believes that we should be grateful that the Aboriginal term "spirit" is ambiguous, so that the non-Aboriginal reader can be left

free to convince himself, and let the experience of the story gradually shape his concept into an appropriate form. If this year he's childish enough to be convinced by a possum with a stone axe, next year he may be more mature; if not, he will still have gained a story he might otherwise have lost (personal communication, August 20, 1987).

Conclusions

The above interpretations of this study highlight the role of the reading community in facilitating or hindering this personal evolution of concepts necessary to allow readers to understand and accept a new and unexpected cultural literary interpretation. The schemata that readers use as a perceptual framework to interpret text are constructed through experience, and specifically, literary schemata are constructed through reading or hearing texts. Therefore the texts shared by a sub-culture of readers tend to produce interpretive communities who hold similar meanings for words and sentences placed in a common context (Purves, 1985). Thus, long term exposure of young readers to literary works written from a single, majority culture perspective sets up conditioned expectations that reinforce existing shared cultural meanings and significance, thereby hindering the recognition and acceptance of alternative interpretive frameworks.

On the other hand, the social context of the reader-text transaction can accommodate both the shared convergent responses that arise from within the readers' culture, and the personal divergent responses that result from differential individual experiences, both virtual and vicarious. When given an opportunity to share their unique recreations, readers are then able to negotiate to construct a consensus of meaning compatible with the author's intentions, which influence the transaction by providing textual constraints to guide the selection, rejection, synthesis, and interpretation of responses.

If these guiding textual cues are too subtle, too implicit, or beyond the readers' experiences or expectations, the readers are unlikely to discern readily the cultural meanings intended by the author. However, additional insights may be gleaned and shared as readers attempt to defend and substantiate their interpretations within their community. For example, in this study, Tony immediately made the cultural connection and kept returning to the text to verify his hypotheses. If he had been able to share his interpretation, he may have provided other members of his group with alternative viewpoints to consider as they searched for ways to make sense of the unfamiliar folk figures. Some, like Jodi, may have rejected such a surprising meeting of cultures, being unable to assimilate it to fit their existing schemata, and not yet able to make enough sense of it to change their picture of the world.

When interacting with challenging, multi-layered texts young readers need time for reflection, a forum for negotiating meaning, and encouragement to make connections between existing constructs, in order to expand and enrich their world representations. As readers engage in this ongoing constructivist process, they enjoy the aesthetic benefits of being absorbed in the world of story; if that story yields a discernible meaning of cross-cultural awareness and respect, the reader and his or her world is so much richer.

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